

Only Skin

by Greenway

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Summary: "Where her voice was soft, kind, vulnerable, and where it gently grasped his wrist and begged him not to go, the voice inside his head was his voice, cold, calculating, commanding, clawing at the back of his neck, not merely telling him to go, but those claws digging deeper and deeper until he knew just how far." A moment. Sometimes a moment is all it takes.

Only Skin

He moved like a wraith through the night, into the cold, into the dark, until he found refuge in the silence of the empty courtyard. There, finally, he exhaled, his breath like steam rising into the air, his body trembling, his shadow dancing back and forth thanks to the moon's pale glow. All night long their eyes had said it loud and clear, their body language louder still, but Draco did not need their silent, wilful judgement to reveal to him the simple truth of this night.

Because they called it the _Victory_ Gala. That meant something. So too did the venue. Hogwarts, where it was all said and done, where the Boy Who Lived became the Boy Who Won, and _this _night, this night more than any other since the night Voldemort was vanquished, celebrated the triumph of triumphs, a victory against all odds, good versus evil, light versus dark, black versus white. All that nonsense.

It was not that this was a lie. This was the truth, the truth the world needed to endure in these trying times and to rebuild. That much he knew. But the disconnect he felt between them and him was tangible. Their judgement he could take, he could brush aside as easily as a Cheering Charm, but inside his head a voice was screaming at him to flee. To run far away, into the night, into the dark, into this fading winter, until no one knew his name, his face, or the horrors in his heart.

It was all reactionary and he knew this. His own cowardice was magnified from the moment he stepped inside the Great Hall. They listed off names of the dead to start with, which seemed to Draco like some gruesome and unpalatable aperitif that these people swallowed easily, readily, and bravery and honour were the words ringing like church bells in the back of his head, but he dared not articulate them for fear it would break him. There wasn't much left, granted, but the closer he came to complete and utter ruin, the tighter he grasped at those tiny, broken pieces.

After the dead, they honoured the living. Name after name after name, each one like a tiny nail in the coffin in which he buried his darkest realisation. Many of them were his peers, and for the most part they had less between their ears, less talent at their fingertips, less renown and resources than those with which he'd been blessed, and yet with each name it felt that coffin was harder to pry open, harder to pull from the hungry earth below. Like his closet it held too many skeletons for him to clearly and concisely communicate, even to himself, but there was one that mattered more so than the rest, one realisation that had dragged him, quite forcibly, from the Great Hall, and towards a future as grim and bleak as he could possibly imagine.

The headstone read: Draco Malfoy, Beloved Son, Taken Too Soon. But like so much about him these days, it was merely a facade hiding the cold, hard truth resting six feet underground. The truth that no matter how much money his family poured into charitable endeavours, no matter how many of these Victory dances they attended, or how much forgiveness they accrued, they or, more to the point, he, could not hide that he was a villain. Not the villain, no, but such a thing was scant constellation on a night where his fear and failing was laid bare.

He took what seemed an almost involuntary step forward, that disconnect now extending within himself, and then another, the blanket of this frigid winter's night threatening to envelop him completely. It was an escape, the coward's path which he had long been adept at sniffing out, and he longed for it, ached inside his very bones, to never again feel as hopelessly weak as he did in that moment, as morally depraved and utterly false, but then a voice found him in the dark. A voice filled with apprehension and the faintest, almost impossible to discern " at least for anyone but a lifelong bully " note of fear.

"Where are you going, Draco?"

That voice inside his head found him again. This time it screamed so loudly he wanted to throw up. Where her voice was soft, kind, vulnerable, and where it gently grasped his wrist and begged him not to go, the voice inside his head was his voice, cold, calculating, commanding, clawing at the back of his neck, not merely telling him to go, but those claws digging deeper and deeper until he knew just how far.

The two conflicting forces left him frozen on the spot, his heart thundering in his chest, and he despised the perfect and convenient symbolism of it all, the pull between light and dark, past and future. It reminded him of another inescapable thought cultivated over the previous six months into a ruthlessly efficient torture device. Draco Malfoy could have been anything he wanted. Anything.

And he chose this.

"Please answer."

Hermione fucking Granger. Why did it have to be her? As of late kindness had been more forthcoming than he deserved, to say the least, and for the most part he could stomach it. But not her.

Anyone but her. Her kindness was unfathomable to him. That vulnerability in her voice broke him because, ironically, it indicated strength he did not possess, the strength to voice that which he feared most. Equally ironic, and completing the paradox, was that the cool command in his voice was indicative of such weakness that he wondered how they â€“ how _she_ â€“ hadn't always seen right through him to the empty child within.

"Go back to the party, Granger," he choked out, his voice as frail as a singular silken thread. "Go back and let them love and adore you. You deserve it. All of you."

He hated those words. He hated that his tongue knew them. But then Draco had always needlessly made an enemy of the truth.

"This night is for us," she replied, her voice like a warm breeze cutting through the winter air. "All of us. Y-youâ€!"

Hermione trailed off into a moment of silence. He hoped briefly her vast intellect had helped her think better of this ludicrous endeavour, or that her survival instincts had kicked in and were ready to, like his own, carry her far away, only in a vastly different direction. But then he felt it â€“ that warmth again. Her footsteps may have been almost silent, lost to the night, but her warmth was the irresistible force he feared most. Without turning to meet her gaze, he knew she was stood right behind him. And as much as any of the pitiful, self-loathing realisations of the last few months, the warmth of her presence, her very being, scared the life out of him.

"You don't have to run. Or hide. Not anymore."

"You're wrong," he replied, a cold and yet not quite cruel edge to his voice. "I do. I really do. Now more than ever."

There was silence again and this time it lingered. Draco tried to differentiate between kindness and pity, defining each thing again and again in his head and stirring them together in search of an answer. Ultimately he realised he was incapable of either and as such ill-equipped to understand the girl stood behind him, invading his personal space. For seven years that much had been true, and he had filled each encounter with sneers and spite so that he might hide that ignorance from her.

"Draco?" she asked.

His name on her lips made him shiver. Anger flared up inside of him but quickly gave way to confusion and then defeat. He knew the words to get rid of her. He knew even how to hurt her. Severely. A part of him, lingering deep within the bloodstains on his fragile soul, _wanted_ to do exactly that. Wanted to reach into the past for some semblance of normality, clinging to the idea that behind a curl of his lip and the word Mudblood he might rediscover and renew Draco

Abraxas Malfoy, the lost boy.

When he tried to ignite that spark nothing happened. There was now only a shadow of that boy. Only skin. That boy was dead, lost in the heat of battle, in the madness of war. What remained still sounded like Draco, cold and calculating. It still looked the same; his grey eyes and pointed features flanked by long, white blonde hair, his perfect posture holding his head high. But if Hermione Granger, impossible and inquisitive and exasperating beyond belief, had reached out a hand and felt the erratic beating of his frightened, hideous heart, if she had held it there long enough for him to reveal the irreparable state of his soul, then she too would have realised it was only skin.

"Draco," she said again when he did not answer, only this time she reached across the alarmingly small space between them and took his hand. "Will you dance with me?"

"What?" he said all too quickly, and he turned for the first time since he'd entered the courtyard to face something other than the darkness that called to him.

If he had thought her voice vulnerable then there was no preparing for that look in her big, brown eyes. And yes, he could take refuge in his reaction to the vision of loveliness stood before him. The pale perfection of her unblemished skin; the natural pink hue to her full, shapely lips; the elegant, barely perceptible contour of her collarbone and then, finally, the lithe yet womanly figure displayed subtlety by the modest and still somehow impossibly alluring crimson dress. However, that reaction alone was where the familiarity began and ended. Because physical, even primal, attraction aside, he had never before seen what he saw then in her eyes.

All that kindness, that irrepressible bravery, all that love â€“ for lack of a better word â€“ in her life. And yet there she stood, laid bare, vulnerable, afraid that he might say no. Afraid that he might use her vulnerability to cover and contain his own. For one last victory, perhaps, when he had nothing else left to lose. And he knew what he was supposed to say. What he was supposed to do. They were from different worlds, made up of different things. But it was only skin that retained those memories now. His heart, fearful though it was, decided it did not care.

Draco took her other hand, his grasp gentle, and instinctively interlaced his long, slender fingers with hers, until her painted nails rested on the back of his hand. She did not fight it. She did not even flinch or hesitate. Their eyes met, her vulnerability and his combining in that moment to create a cocktail of heart-stopping uncertainty and, inevitably, a long, lingering silence.

The music of the Great Hall was too far from their ears. They had only the soft and yet persistent evening breeze to move to. Draco, to his own great surprise, made the first move, lifting her right hand in his left and beginning to ever so slowly sway their bodies in sync with the silence. Their silence.

Her eyes were unrelenting. A part of Draco felt as if she was torturing him with the vulnerability within, as if imploring him to understand the pain he had put her through over the years, from the petty, off-hand remarks to the genuinely vile, sneering gibes that he

knew would wound her. Again, he heard his voice inside his head. Only this time there was no screaming, no insistence that he run. Instead, he played back every exchange they'd shared over the previous seven years, one by one. That first day on the Hogwarts Express appeared to him in every bit as much clarity as the present moment played out before his eyes.

It was a vile, relentless nightmare, and he was the monster at the end of it.

Then he felt it. The pinpricks at the back of his eyes. His jaw clenched suddenly, his teeth grinding together, and what little power he had left in his being fought and fought not to let even one tear spill from his already shimmering eyes. His fragile state was no excuse. Nor was that arresting look in her eyes. It was then as if he reached into his soul, his thin, dexterous hands grasping around some physical embodiment of the thing, squeezing it, shaking it, feeling it grow limp in its sad and sorry state, but the harder he pressed himself the stronger the sensation grew.

And then, after a moment, there it was. Seven long years and a cataclysmic war later and she, Hermione Granger, had brought him to his knees.

"It's okay," she whispered, the smallest of smiles tugging at her lips. But that wasn't enough. She stopped swaying. She let go of one of his hands "just one" and, after extending herself onto the tips of her toes, pressed her thumb to his cheek, just below his piercing eyes, and caught the first tear before it could go any further. He stiffened slightly at her touch, his breath catching sharply in his throat, but she remained undeterred. She caught them all, one by one, her own vulnerability never leaving her eyes, the kind smile always lifting her lips, the two gestures in perfect harmony upon her beautiful face.

"I'm sorâ€"" he began to say, the sentiment torn from his very heart, but the second syllable never came, obscured as it was by her finger on his thin, pale lips. He looked surprised, his brows lifting to the heavens.

"You don't need to say that word, Draco. I can feel it," she added, nodding. "And you don't have to be that person anymore. You can be whoever you want to be."

Only when the last tear fell did her hand leave his cheek and almost instinctively it found his again, waiting as it was by his side, open, willing, cold to the touch but quickly warmed by her grasp. This time he squeezed, and when he did she squeezed back.

Who were they? It was such a profound question that one feared even to breach the surface out of fatal concern that the depths might claim them. And yet he took that plunge almost instantly, without thought or fear, for despite whatever harsh truths he was yet to face she was, in that moment at least, with him. That mattered in a way he could scarcely comprehend.

"Hermione," he said, articulating a name, a word, which for so many years, and in so many different respects, had been on his mind but never his tongue.

"Yes, Draco?" she replied, returning the gesture.

"I am afraid," he said, his voice uneven, and with an almost imperceptible tremble to his bottom lip. "Afraid of what I was. How _easy_ it was for me to be that boy. And how hard it is now for me to be anything else. I feel so alone. So alone that I worry this is a dream, and that when I wake up in a moment I won't be me and you won't be you. I feel like everything I've ever known lays broken at my feet. Things that deserved to die, evil, wretched things, but they were a part of me. A big part. And I don't know what's left. I don't even know how you can look at me."

Hermione didn't respond right away, but she watched him as he watched her. He noted the slight furrow of her brow as she lost herself in thought. Draco was himself lost in her presence, intoxicating as it was to him. He was waiting, hanging on every subtle shift in her expression, every word yet to come. He realised that for the first time in a long time he was afraid not of the past, or of the monsters in it, but of the present, because this, whatever it was â€“ everything, nothing â€“ it felt as real as a straight razor at his throat, and every bit as frightful.

"This time last year I would wake up and wonder if today was the day the world would end. Today was all I had, Draco," she said quietly. "I never thought there would be a tomorrow. Hope was a dangerous ally. You needed it, and it needed you, but the moment you grasped too tightly at itâ€" There was a sadness in her eyes, as if she were back in that moment, lost again in the dark, endless days of war. "It turned to smoke and slipped through your fingers.

"Today, though... today is a good day, Draco. Do you know why?" she asked, finally smiling at him.

"Yes," he said, lost to her words, her scent, still swaying with her in the gentle breeze, the motion by now as natural to him as breathing. "I think so. Because today comes before tomorrow."

Hermione nodded. The vulnerability remained in her eyes but there was now something else, something more. A brightness that came from within, impossible to fake, or to force. He had seen it before but only from afar. Her happiness glowing like a star, filling that previously unfathomable darkness that lay before him.

"I know who I want to be," he said, the corner of his pale lips twisting into the faintest of smiles. Draco could not know it, it was for Hermione and Hermione alone to realise, but the vulnerability in his eyes reflected hers completely.

There they stood, slowly swaying, both of them wounded, damaged, weakened but not defeated.

A boy and a girl. Nothing more. Nothing less.

"I want to be this person. This person right here, right now â€“ with you."

End
file.